CHAPTER V

CONSTRUCTION OF DALIT IDENTITY: ASSERTION OF THE SELF

There has been a long tradition of intellectual reconstruction of the Dalit identity in India. The eminent activists who contributed to the process include Phule, Periyar and Ambedkar, among others. Before them, the Bakti saints made a remarkable contribution in the form of questioning the Brahmanical hegemony. They questioned the religious restrictions on worship during the 10th and 13th centuries, because of which the Bakti movement became popular among the sudras and ati-shudras. This chapter explores, by referring to select Dalit autobiographies, the contribution of the Adi-movements, the non-Brahman movements against the Brahmin hegemony, Dr. Ambedkar's attempts of the intellectual re-construction of the Dalit identity and the identity movements in the contemporary period leading to the culmination of the reconstruction of the Dalit identity.

I

This section explores the formation of the Dalit identity in the early period for a proper understanding of the evolution of

the identity movement. Identity formation is a historical process. Identity formation is based on the experience of the Dalits in relation to the community. The experience about oneself and the community is a part of the existing socio-economic, political, cultural order. Identity as a concept is based on the experience of one self in relation to others, similar beliefs and cultural expressions that cause to formulate the identity. This can as well be applied to the identity formation of the Dalits against the backdrop of various phases of the consciousness building movements.

The first phase of the identity formation of the Dalits may be said to be the Bhakti movement, which helped construct an identity in opposition to the Brahmin identity. The mystics who led the Bhakti movement include Ramanand and Raidas in the North, Chaitanya and Chandidasa in the East, Eknath, Choka Mela, Thukaram and Narsinh Mehta in the West and Ramanuja, Nimbaraka and Basava in the South. Their contribution to the anti-Brahmin thought lies in opposing caste distinctions and asserting equality before god. M.G. Ranade called the Bakti movement being unbrahmanical.[1] However, the saint poets did not advocate detachment from normal worldly life as a prerequisite for the salvation. They advocated normal family life

in society. Unlike the Brahmin priests, Bakti poets disapproved of renunciation, asceticism and celibacy as the means of enlightenment. The significant contribution of the Bakti poets is that the untouchables identified themselves as anti-brahmanical by which they formed a unique non-Brahmin identity.

Next to the Bakti movement, the 'Adi' movements were significant in the formation of the Dalit identity. Gail Omvedt argues that "The mobilization of the oppressed and exploited sections of society, the peasants, Dalit, women and low castes that Phule had spoken of as shudras and ati-shudras occurred on a large scale in the 1920s and 1930s, under varying leaderships and with varying ideologies."[2] The 'Non-Aryan' or the non-brahmin movements in Maharastra and Tamilnadu, the Dalit movements in Panjab and Karnataka were against the Aryan conquest and Brahman exploitation through religion and culture. These movements, being aimed at the argument of the original inhabitants, have a common tag 'Adi' which means original inhabitant. Most of the Dalit movements like 'Adi-Dharma' in Punjab, 'Adi-Hindu' in UP and Hyderabad, 'Adi-Dravida,' 'Adi-Andhra' and 'Adi-Karnataka' in South India have a common claim of the Dalits and Sudras being the original habitants of India. Gail Omvedt writes:

> It was in the 1920s, however, that Dalits began to organize strongly and independently through out many regions of India. The most important of the early Dalit movements were the Ad-Dharm movement in the Punjab (organized 1926); the movement under Ambedkar in Maharastra, mainly based among Mahars which had its organizational beginnings in 1924; the Namashudra movement in Bengal; the Adi-Dravida movement in Tamilnadu; the Adi-Karnataka movement; the Adi-Hindu movement mainly centered around Kanpur in U.P; and the organizing of the pulayas and Cherumans in Kerala.[3]

The Namasudhra movement in 1972 was the first protest against the social authority of the higher castes. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay views:

> The Namasudhra movement in Bengal is the story of an antyaja or untouchable caste, transforming itself from an amphibious peripheral multitude into a settled agricultural community, protesting against the age-old social disabilities and economic exploitation it suffered from, entering the vortex of institutional politics and trying to derive benefit out of it through an essentially loyalist political strategy.[4]

The Namashudras, earlier known as chandals, lived mainly in the low lying swap areas of Eastern Bengal. The Namasudras or chandals, who are considered untouchables, are originally a tribal community living in the Eastern Bengal even before the formation of the Brahmanical social order. The Namasudra movement protested against the oppressive domination of the high castes showing allegiance to the patronizing colonial elite. This resulted in the emergence of backward class politics in Bengal. The Namasudras embraced Islam or Christianity to avoid the stigma of untouchability in the early twentieth century. Chandal Movement of 1872-73 led to the formation of the Namasudra. Led by Harichand Thakur of Faridpur and his son in the subsequent period, the movement believed in education and self-respect.

Next to Namasudra movement, Ad-Dharm movement, led by Mangoo Ram in Punjab, made a substantial contribution to the social and political life of Dalits in Punjab. He was influenced by the Ghadar movement, a radical organization in California aimed at liberating India from British rule through armed insurrection. He opened a school for the lower caste children in the village, where the Ad-Dharm movement

was launched in 1926. The movement however was split into two groups, the other influenced by Arya Samaj: "While the Arya Samaj was making frantic to bring Shudras who had converted to Islam, Christianity and Sikhism back into the Hindu fold, Mangoo Ram thought it appropriate to intervene at this juncture to espouse the Dalit cause and carve out a separate Dalit identity."[5]

The ideology and principles of the Ad-Dharm movement greatly influenced the Dalits of the Doaba region decisively contributing to the formation of the Dalit identity.

Adi-Hindu movement, under the leadership of Swami Acchutanand, in Utter Pradesh is another significant movement that contributed to the construction of the Dalit identity in the 1920s. Though Arya Samaj promised to facilitate the social uplift of lower castes, its intention of enslaving untouchables to Hinduism is criticized by the Adi-Hindu leaders. Swami Acchutanand claimed in a speech, "The Samaj aimed to make all Hindus slaves of the Vedas and the Brahmins."[6]

Achutanand and Ram Charan constructed an identity which traces out the history of the original inhabitants of India. They outlined an idealized vision of social equality and of past power and glory of the untouchables. 'Self-assertion' was an important

principle of Adi-Hindu movement. Exploring the identities of self-assertion and empowerment that Adi movements espoused, Nandini Goopta states that by asserting that the untouchables were the true masters of the land, the Adi-Hindu preachers cultivated a sense of entitlement to rights and power at the same time as they heightened an awareness of historical deprivation. The stress on *atmagyan* (self-knowledge) and introspection as the source of independent knowledge without higher caste impositions also enabled the exposition of a distinction, autonomous, proud and even defiant self-identity of the untouchables.[7]

The Adi-Hindu movement provided not only 'an ideology of radical equality' and 'a strategy for doing better in every day life', but also 'a political culture for civil rights and organized protest.'[8] Though the Arya Samaj and Congress have caused to split the Adi-Hindu movement in 1930s, the Adi-Hinduism, on the whole, formed the dominant and sustained form of its political expression and a constructive identity.

Similar to the Adi movements in Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and the Namasudra movement in Bengal, the Adi movements in South India had their resonance in constructing Dalit identity. The untouchable movements in Nagpur, Adi-Dravida movement

in Tamilnadu, Adi-Karnataka movement in Mysore, Adi-Andhra movement in Andhra Pradesh under Madras Presidency and Adi-Hindu movement under the Nizam reign had paved the way for constructing the Dalit identity in South India.

In Nagpur, a relatively strong and independent Dalit movement grew and Kisan Faguji Bansode (1870-1946) was the leader of the Dalits in Nagpur. In 1903, he founded the first organization in Mohapa, his village and many educational institutions including a school for girls in 1907. Bansode wrote several books and started several papers. Later, many leaders especially Vithoba Ravji Moonpandit (1860-1924) and Ganesh Akkaji Gavai (1888-1974) came into light as the untouchable leaders. Gannesh Akkaji Gavai founded a 'Mahar Library' and 'Mahar Sudharak Mandal' in his village. Kalicharan Nandagawali (1886-1962) founded the first girls' school and also became a member of the legislative council.

Like Acchutanand in UP and Mangoo Ram in Punjab, E.V.Rama Swamy (1879-1973) popularly known as Periyar led the self-respect movement in Tamilnadu. One of the greatest anti-Brahman movements in India, self-respect movement targeted the Brahmin dominance criticizing the idol worship. Aloysius comments on Periyar:

His focus was not God and religion in general or in the philosophical sense but religion in particular – the Brahminical religion – taken in its practical – social dimension of buttressing up social iniquity and in humanity."[9]

All the religions, being historical creations, tend to accumulate beliefs and practices that become anachronistic and anti-social. Periyar clarifies that:

The self-respect movement was started with the objective of instilling a sense of self-respect in the people of this country and to unify them. The self-respect movement really endeavors in transparency, to explain why and how the people of our country had lost their self-pride, to assert that the obstacles in their way should be abolished and indeed to abolish such obstacles.[10]

Periyar educated the Dravidians and Adi-Dravidians to bring about a cultural revolt with an aim of making society casteless and egalitarian. Braj Ranjan Mani observes:

Stressing egalitarian social relations across caste, community and gender lines, Periyar advocated the overthrow of caste and instituted non-Brahmanic forms of marriage celebrating the equality of women and her right

to choose life-partner and other such practices designed to give a death blow to the Brahmanical order. Presenting a radical critique of the religious beliefs and practices in a variety of ways, Periyar wanted to demolish the whole Brahmanic structure of society which he saw as the root cause of the degradation and subordination of Women and the non-brahman populace.[11]

Periyar joined the congress in 1919 and became a prominent figure in Tamil Congress. But soon he saw it a Brahman Tamil Congress and left it to organize the self-respect movement. Periyar also disagreed with Gandhi on issues like caste, culture and nationalism.

Another prominent identity moment in Tamilnadu is led by Jyothee Thassay, who campaigned for education among the untouchables. He set up several schools for Dalits and his writings are remarkably modern for espousing the cause of social emancipating, Buddhism, rationalism and the new egalitarian Dravidian identity.[12] He considered the Brahmins mentally, morally and culturally depressed as they clanged on to anachronistic beliefs and obscurantist practices.

Another significant movement of identity took place in Kerala. The movements led by Ayyankali, Pokayil Yohannan and

Pamapady John Joseph had a polemical role to enlighten the Dalits of Kerala. Sri Narayana Guru (1856-1928) was an active socio-political and religious reformer for nearly four decades during the most critical period of Kerala's history. He believed in the message of 'one god, one religion and one caste,' which developed a new consciousness among the Dalits. The backward caste movements in Kerala differed from other movements like that of Jotirao Phule, whose movement consisted of Shudras and ati-Shudras (the untouchable) and women. But such an attempt was absent in Kerala and the movement lead by Sree Narayana Guru remained mostly the movement for the upliftment and empowerment of the Izhavas.

Among the Dalit movements in Kerala, the movement by Ayyankali was of great success in constructing Dalit identity. Ayyankali, an illiterate Dalit, unlike Sree Narayana Garu, was not philosophical. His movement was humanistic and democratic. To him, socio-cultural issues were more important than the economic issues. Ayyankali fought for the rights of his people to use public space and for education. By doing so, Ayyankali successfully contributed to the formation of the individual identity.

Ayyankali established open school in Vengannoor in 1904 but faced severe resistance from the caste Hindus. He gathered the scheduled castes to go on strike and continued it for one full year. To protect the strikers against criminal elements recruited by landlords, a small group of youth known as "Ayyankali Pada" was formed under his organization. Another element that Ayyankali movement concentrated on was performing folk arts. Ayyankali collected small band of youth belonging to his caste and trained them in martial and folk arts like 'Pattukachery', 'Parijakali', 'Kolkali', Kurathiattom', Kakkarassi drama' and 'Valli drama.' This was his first attempt at identity construction.

Formation of 'Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangam' (SJPS) was another significant form of identity formation in the Ayyankali movement. It was democratic in character and gender sensitive. Kerala Pulayar Maha Sabha by TT Kesava Shashtri, son-in-law of Ayyankali, obtained the four basic rights for the Dalits: right to appear in pubic places decently dressed, right to education, cultural rights and the right to be represented in the government. These were the subtle forms of the assertion of the Dalit identity.

The Dalit movements and literature in Andhra Pradesh began as early as 1900. The Adi-Hindu movements in

Hyderabad and Adi-Dravida movement in Andhra region played significant roles in constructing the Dalit identity in the pre-independence period. The Adi-Hindu movement under Nizam rule was led by Bagya Reddy Varma (1888-1939), who organized 'Jagan Mitra Mandali' in 1906, found 'Manya Samngam' in 1911 and the Adi-Hindu organization in the same year. Bagya Reddy Varma and his followers strongly fought for the compulsory education to the Dalit children and severely opposed the practices like child marriages, eating meet and using drink in marriages and also against the uncivic notions like 'Jogini', Murti' and 'Basivi' through which young and uneducated untouchable girls were devoted to gods and goddesses. Between 1906 and 1916, Bagya Reddy Varma's concentration was particularly on educating Dalits through folk songs and street plays. He went across the entire Telangana region and gave the message of revolution to the Dalits. Ariga Ramaswami and B. Syam Sundhar were other contemporaries of Bagya Reddy Varma who contributed to the construction of Dalit identity in Hyderabad state.

The Adi-Andhra Movement took place in the coastal parts of Andhra Pradesh in the Madras Presidency. The common interface between the Adi-Hindu movement in Hyderabad and

the Adi-Andhra Movement in Andhra was that both the movements were led by Bagya Reddy Varma in both the regions. The Adi-Andhra movement took place in 1917 with the 'First Provincial Panchama Mahajana Sabha' organized in Vijayawada. Bagya Reddy Varma opposed the use of the term *panchamas.* Some of the significant resolutions were: providing education to Dalit children, forming separate schools for Dalit children, allowing Dalits to use government wells, schools and public shelter, among others. The Adi-Andhra Conferences were held every year.[13]

The Adi-Andhra movement became a platform for political mobilization. Boyi Bhimanna, Kusuma Dharmmanna and Jala Rangaswamy wrote against caste oppression, untouchability and discrimination stressing that that the Dalits were the original inhabitants of the Telugu region. Gurram Jashuva's *Piradousi* (1932) *Gabbilam* (The Bat); Kusuma Dharmanna's *Nalla Dhoratham* (1933), *Harijana Chathakam* (1933) *Madhyapana Nishedham* (1930); Boyi Bhimanna's *Paleru* (1940), *Cooliraju* (1947) and *Jana Padhuni Jabhulu* (1940); Jala Rangaswami's *Mala Shuddi* (1930); Nakka China Venkataiah's *Harijana Keerthanalu* (1935); Nuthakki Abraham and Premaiah were among those who wrote about the Dalit identity.

II

Following the mystics' and the social activists' attempts at crystallizing the Dalit idenity, Ambedkar (1891-1956) provided intellectual basis to the formation of the Dalit identity. Following the early Dalit movement, Ambedkar, organized Dalits socially, politically and intellectually through the process of which, the formation of the Dalit identity assumed a definitive form. Ambedkar launched many struggles during the 50 years of his social life. Ambedkar's Mahad struggle for the untouchable's access to public water in 1927 was successful as a civil rights issue. Later on he became the champion of human rights. Subsequently, Ambedkar fought for separate electorates. Ambedkar educated the Dalits that their identity is different from that of the Hindus. He even asked the Dalits to have their dwellings away from the Hindu Society. As the Chairman of the Constitution Drafting Committee and the first Law Minister, Ambedkar contributed immeasurably to the socio-cultural assertion of the Dalit identity. With the embracing of Buddhism with many of his followers and in proclaiming Buddhism as the alternative to the irrational Hinduism, Ambedkar provided spiritual basis to the Dalit identity.

Jyothiba Phule's women liberation movement inspired Ambedkar very much. Liberation of the women was taken up by him as the main part of renaissance. In addition to the Hindu reformist programmes of the widow marriages and annihilation of the *sati* system, he concentrated on education and rights for women. He struggled hard to liberate women from the age old slavery and to create a share in all the spheres of life.

While Brahma Samaj and Arya Samaj kept women in dark, Ambedkar demolished these dens and opened up new horizons of freedom and equality for women. Instead of proposing reformations for women, he put forward total liberation for women. While *Manusmruthi* enslaved women, Ambedkar awakened their mind, ignited their heart, strengthened their energies and resurrected them as powerful human beings. He fought against the state and society to realize justice for women.

The services rendered by Ambedkar to the liberation of women as a Bombay Legislature member, Law and Labour member in Viceroy's Executive Council, Indian Constitution Drafting Committee Chairman and Law Minister played important role in the enactment of laws. His relentless fight for bringing out revolutionary changes in the social and economic

life of women in the form of introducing the Hindu Code Bill is important. On marriage, divorce and succession of parental properties, he proposed the abolition of polygamy and also the right of divorce to Hindu women and a share in the husband's and father's property. However, the Dalit movement in India was split into groups after Ambedkar passed away. In the subsequent period, two Dalit writer-activists Namder Dhasal and J.V. Pawar took initiative in forming the Dalit Panthers movement in Bombay in 1972. Dalit poetry, Dalit theatre (Street Plays) and Dalit autobiographies remained the direct means to address and educate the Dalits. The Dalits in India struggled for human rights. Self-assertion, self-respect and Dalit empowerment are the major themes of the movement and it imparted the proletarian radical class identity to Dalits and also linked their struggle of all oppressed people over the globe.[14]

The Dalit movements from 1980s onwards aimed at fighting for Dalit assertion. The exploitation and discrimination of the Dalits on one hand and their protest and revolt on the other hand initiated the questions of self-assertion and consciousness among the Dalits. Through their revolt, Dalits provided a new identity for them. This identity strengthened its resolve to fight every form of discrimination and determine the

path for liberation. Asserting themselves, the Dalits challenged the very foundation on which the Indian society and polity are based.

III

Taking the lead from Ambedkar's theoretical basis of the Dalit identity, literary writers and activists began to narrate the Dalit experiences. Dalit writers and activists brought awareness among the Dalits. The concerns of the writers include denial of access to resources, participation in political processes, exclusion from social institutions, construction of Dalit identity, demanding equal share in resource, among others. Their writings are aimed at building awareness. Gopal guru identifies that the Dalit literature is classified into literature of Dalit cities and that of mud house writes. To him, mud house Dalit literature means writing about oral traditions of the Dalits which is ignored by the elite Dalit writers.

As Dalit writers themselves being the victims, they use literature as a vehicle to propagate the Ambedkarite ideology. The Dalit literature, that includes all the genres like short stories, novels, poetry, critical essays, plays and autobiographies, provides critical in sights into the question of the Dalit identity. The teachings of Ambedkar sharpened their

sensitivities, and made them outward-looking, articulate and assertive in their expression. The Dalit writings are used to educate the Dalits. The prose narratives, especially mediated between Dalit writers and the Dalits to form the modes of social protest. The dalit narratives are used to raise awareness that caste is the root cause of social discrimination. The Dalit narratives capture the local idiom finding global space. Subverting the conventional epistemology, Dalit writers challenge the Brahmanism through their writings.

The modern Dalit writing became visible with the publication of Arjun Dangle's *The Poisoned Bread* (1992) followed by Waman Nimbalkar's *Dalit Literature: Nature and Role* (2006), Sharan Kumar Limbale's *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* (2004), Omprakash Valmiki's *Dalit Sahityaka Saundary shastra* (2001).

Though Dalit writings consist of all literary forms like poetry, short stories, songs (folklore), plays, and novels, the Dalit autobiographies seek to unveil the wretchedness and miseries which were a part of Dalit life and experience P. Ajay Kumar, Scholar critic on Dalit studies opines that autobiographies have always been a popular form of writing because the unique experience of an individual have instructing

values. He further states that the entire Dalit literature pretends to be autobiographical because Dalit writings refuse to soar high in the wings of imagination. The Dalit autobiography is understood as a genre because it adds to the growth and development of Dalit literature as a whole. The personal narratives of the Dalits speak about the heroic journey of the entire community in the process of self-assertion, liberty, self-respect and empowerment. And the same journey gives than a unique identity which is nothing but exploring the experiences of a entire people's history through narratives. Laxman Mane's *Upara* (1997), Laxman Gaikwad's *The Branded* (1998), Vasanth Moon's G*rowing up Untouchable in India* (2001), Narendra Jadav's O*utcaste* (2003), Sharan Kumar Limbale's *The Outcaste* (2003), Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* (2003), Joseph Mackwan's *The Stepchild* (2004), Aravind Malgathi's *Government Brahmana* (2007), and of women writers Bama's *Karukku* (2000), Viramma Josiane Racine Jean Luc Racine's V*iramma: Life of a Dalit* (1997), Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* (2009) and Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (2008) are the Dalit autobiographies in which the protagonists trace out the genesis of Dalit identity and celebrate the self of their community.

IV

Dalits' search for identity brought out a new consciousness in modern India. The Dalit identity does not merely mean identify oneself with the Dalit self, but to bring awareness among the fellow Dalits. When a Dalit narrates about himself, one does not narrate one's personal history; what one narrates is the history of his community. It is comparable to the native movements in America, native-Canadian Movement, aboriginal movements in Australia and Maori movement in New Zealand. The Durban conference on racism was an attempt at tracing out the validity of the Dalit identity in the postmodern context. However, the mainstream writers and the media belonging to the upper castes were quite indifferent: "The main stream discourse has focused by and larger on the accommodation and segregation of Dalit people into a Caste Hindu world of culture and living, a world where Dalit identity is absorbed."[15] The mainstream discourse is focused on the division of the Dalits into Hindus, Christians, Muslims and Buddhists.

Sharankumar Limbale depicts the resonance and interface between the Dalit movements in India and the native movements in America:

> African American and Dalit movements have proceeded along different paths and taken different turnings, But both

> movements are struggles for human rights and against exploitation…Despite differences of country, region, conditions, society and language, the similarity is the life experience of the two communities derives from the fact that both were targets of excess, injustice and slavery – their experience of pain is of a world scale…Because of these similarities, Dalit writers see the pain of African American writers as their own. African Americans have expressed their sorrow and pain through blues, ballads, stories, novels, dances and songs. Dalit writers have also communicated their pain through literature.[16]

Malcom X'sThe Autobiography of Malcom X (1965), Haarriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), *The Wretched of the Earth* (1967), Ngugiwa Thiong 'o' s *A grain of Wheat* (1967), are instrumental in legitimating the Black literature and identity in the West. Their counterparts in India include Phule's *Slavery,* Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste*, *the Riddles of Rama and Krishna* and several of his writings and speeches awakened the Dalit consciousness. They are the prime resources to understand and contest the caste issues in Indian literature.

Influenced by Phule and Ambedkar many Dalit writers, who experienced the travails of caste oppression, narrated their experiences in their works. The Dalit autobiographies are found suitable for narrating their experiences. Sharan Kumar Limbale's *The Outcaste* (2003)*,* Narendra Jadav's *Outcaste* (2003), Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* (2003) and Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (2008) have been selected for examining the aspect of constructing the Dalit identity.

Identity in Dalit perspective is the similarity in terms of culture and living experiences. The experiences of caste discrimination, economic exploitation, denial of knowledge and gender dominance are common among the Dalits. The personal narratives of the Dalits deal with the problems of caste, class and gender. In this context, the language and culture of the Dalits play key role in depicting the Dalit identity. The Dalit autobiographies are written in Dalit idiom. While introducing and addressing the characters in their personal narratives, the Dalit writers use such vocabulary different from the one used by the mainstream writers. They use the pronouns 'I', 'we' and 'our' for representing Dalits and 'you', 'yours', 'they' and 'their' for addressing the non-Dalits especially the so called upper caste Hindu elites.

One of the significant characteristics of the Dalit autobiographies is that the Dalit writers never find themselves away from their community. They identify themselves within their community. Ghanshyam Shaw writes in this regard:

> Identity is concerned with the self – esteem self-image of a community – real or imaginary – dealing with the existence and role: 'who are we?' 'What position we do have in society Vis–a– vas other communities?' 'How are we related to others?' Nothing standing differences in the nature of Dalit movements and the meaning of identity, there has been a common quest – the quest for equality, self – dignity and eradication of untouchability'.[17]

The self-esteem and self-image are the two key aspects of the autobiographies selected for the study: Sharan Kumar Limbale's *The Outcaste*, Narendra Jadav's *Outcaste*, Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* and Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke.* These autobiographies depict the lives of the narrators and their people.

The narrators of the select Dalit autobiographies find their community as the protagonist of their narratives. They agree that their association with their community is inseparable and

they do not dissociate themselves with their community. Sharan Kumar Limbale writes in *The Outcaste*:

> My history is my mother's life, at the most my grandmother's. My ancestry doesn't go back go back any further. My mother is an untouchable, while my father is a high caste from one of the privileged classes of India. Mother lives in a hut, father lives in a mansion, Father is a land lord; mother, landless. I am an *akkarmashi* (half-caste). I am condemned, branded illegitimate (Limbale, IX)[18]

Limbale raises the question of identity. He states that he was a half-breed of an upper-caste father and a Mahar mother. He deplores that his upper caste father never dares to accept Limbale as his son. Limbale states about the helpless condition of his mother who became a victim in the hands of an upper caste man. The plight of Limbale's mother is indicative of the plight of umpteen number of the Dalit women all over the country. By narrating the plight of his mother, Limbale projected a unique identity for Dalit women. G.N. Devy views:

> Limbale presents his own mother who has been cheated again and again, exploited most blatantly in every relationship she strikes, burdened with a roll call of

children and upbringing. The author however shows a remarkable understanding of their situation. There is no cursing or blaming them in his narrative, there is not even a tone of pity for them in it."[19]

Limbale identifies himself with the Mahar community. He writes, "The umbilical cord between our locality and the village has snapped, as if the village, torn asunder, has thrown us out of it. We had grown up like aliens since our infancy. This sense of alienation increased over the years and to this day my childhood haunts me."(5) Limbale mentions about the division between the Maharwada and the village, where the Patils and other upper caste people live.

Caste discrimination and constant battle with hunger are the major themes of Limbale's autobiography. The question of identity is equally an integral part of his life story. The impossible hurdle that the author suffered his entire life was the fact that he had no identity, no home or place of belonging. His mother had once been properly married, but her husband had left her and taken their two sons. She began sleeping with the high caste men of the village. Limbale was born with a Dalit mother and a father who was the chief of a village. He could not get certain papers signed for school because he could not properly identify his caste by his mother or father, and they would not

accept his grandmother as his guardian because she lived with a Muslim. When it was the time of his marriage, he could not even get married to an outcaste girl because his blood was not pure. He realized that he was not wanted anywhere. Eventually, a drunkard who had offered Limbale his daughter would not allow her to leave after the wedding because of Limbale's background. The clouds of doubt and identity hung over this poor outcaste boy throughout his life.

However, in several acts of incredible strength and bravery, he did not allow these socially constructed obstacles to stop him from being educated. He realized the depth of division caused by the conflict between Hindus and Muslims. Limbale states that the influence of Ambedkar and his involvement in the Dalit Panthers movement changed his life. Tromila Wheat writes:

> Limbale's autobiography is a good quick read that would interest any students taking a course on modern India. It is an objective work that shows little bitterness or remorse. The author includes an excellent introduction that introduces the caste system to the Western reader. We can experience the humiliation of the Dalit community at the hands of an unthinking privileged class and the hopelessness of the situation of people born in lower castes."[20]

Narendra Jadav identifies himself with the people to whom he belongs to in his *Outcaste* (2003). Irrespective of the qualification he acquired and the position he reached, he could not stop himself finding among his community people. Jadav writes:

> These people, raw, down–to– earth, unpolished are the ones to whom I belong", I thought. Born in the confines of poverty, illiteracy and ignorance they were at different stages of struggles in life .But they are my people, I thought, with a sense of belonging, as they looked at me with awe. In their eyes, I had managed, through hard work and perseverance to climb out of the morass of untouchability, illiteracy and backwardness." (Jadav, 203)[21]

The expressions like 'the one to whom I belong' and 'but they are my people' imply that Jadav always identifies himself with his community. Jadav states that no matter what he did, where he went, or what success he achieved, he would always be looked upon as a Mahar, an untouchable. Jadav's argument is suggestive of the caste identity irrespective of the place, position and success. Jadav writes further: "It is unfortunate truth of our society that whatever height a man might scale, his

caste is never cast off; it remains an inseparable part of his identity. His caste always remains a cause for scorn or contempt. Only the type of humiliation changes." (208)

Om Prakash Valmiki depicts in *Joothan* (2003) the identity of the Dalits based on caste. He shows the difference between the Chuhras to whom Valmiki belongs and that of the Tagas, the upper caste people. *Joothan* begins with the discrimination of Barla village:

> Our House was adjacent to Chandrabhan Taga's gher or cowshed. Next to it lived the families of Muslim weavers. Right in front of Chandrabhan Taga gher was a little johri, a pond, which had created a sort of partition between the Chuhras dwelling and the village … on one side of the pit were the high walls of the brick homes of the tagas…on the edges of the pond were the homes of the Chuhras… (Valmiki, 1)[22]

Similar to Sharan Kumar Limbale's autobiography, Valmiki's autobiography also had identical line of caste divisions in the villages between the upper caste and the Dalits.

Valmiki writes that "the pigs wandering in narrow lanes, naked children, dogs, daily fights, this was the environment of my childhood."(1) Valmiki's argument is a critique of Gandhian

notion of the village and the *Gram Swarajyam*. The Chuhras have to work without pay. Valmiki writes:

> We did all sorts of work for the Tagas, including cleaning, agricultural work and general labor. We would often have to work without pay. Nobody dared to refuge this unpaid work for which we got neither money nor grain. Instead, we got sworn at and abused. (2)

The untouchables in villages were forced to undertake unpaid work. In this context, Valmiki identifies himself with his cast people. Regarding the identity of the Dalits by names, he writes: "They did not call us by our names. If a person were older, then he would be called "Oe Chuhre." If the person was younger or of the same age, then 'Abey Chuhre' was used."(2) The relative pronoun 'us' and the possessive pronoun 'our' imply that Valmiki identifies himself with his Chuhra Community like Limbale and Jadav identified with their Mahar Community.

Valmiki is equally concerned about the Dalit issues. Substantiating the contribution of Valmiki in representing the Chuhra, community, Raj Kumar writes: "He is convinced that only by raising caste-related issues he will be able to start a discussion on the plight of Dalits at a national level. The publication of Joothan in English in the meantime has generated a lot of discussion related to Dalits. Valmiki

announces that the main issue of his autobiography is about 'identity' concerning caste."[23] Though the title *Joothan – A Dalit's Life* indicates that it is about the life story of an individual, it speaks about the history of the entire Chuhra community. The Chuhra community has been subjected to the caste based discrimination for ages. Valmiki describes how his entire community depends on the leftover food thrown out by the upper castes in return for their hard but unpaid work. The entire community had to depend on the mercy of the upper castes who, instead of paying labour, exploit them.

Valmiki dispensed with the practice of begging *Salam,* a begging tradition of the Chuhras even at an early age. Though Valmiki faced humiliation and insults from both upper caste teachers and students in school and college life, he never suppressed his desire to continue with his studies. Due to his hard work and determination, he became the first graduate in his community. He inspired his caste people to join their children in schools. Valmiki developed the Dalit consciousness among his people. He could do so because of his understanding of the philosophy of Dr. Ambedkar. Raj Kumar writes:

> He is pained to see his fellow community members doing the same traditional duties without any protest. By writing his autobiography Valmiki thus renders a great service to his

community. Along with his life-history he also narrates the painful experiences of his community life. It is in this sense that Valmiki's life-story is also the story of his community."[24]

Valmiki is one among the committed Dalit writers determined to bring awareness among his people.

Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (2008) is a Dalit woman's autobiography. Though written by a woman, it deals with the identity of the Dalit Community in general. Kamble states in an interview:

> Well, I wrote about what my community experienced. The suffering of my people became my own suffering. Their experiences become mine. So I really find it very difficult to think of myself outside of my community."(Kamble, 205)[25]

Kamble's determination to identify herself with her community is worth commending. She writes about the poor and the helpless conditions of her people. She writes that the Dalits were treated like animals. They were reduced to a condition worse than that of the bullocks kept in the courtyards of the high castes:

> The bullocks were at least given some dry grass to eat. The bullocks ate the grass and slogged for their masters. But we were merely given leftovers. We ate the leftovers without complaining and laboured for others. The only difference, however, was that the beasts could eat a bellyful and they could stay in their masters courtyards. But our condition was far worse our place was in the garbage pits outside the village, where everyone threw away their waste. That was where we lived in our poor huts, amidst all the filth! (49)

Kamble's autobiography deals with three major problems of the society: firstly, the oppression and exploitation of the Dalit by the upper class: secondly, the discrimination towards women in a patriarchal society and finally the influence of Dr. Ambedkar on the narrator. Poverty was an unresolved problem among the Mahars and the condition of the Mahar women was miserable. The Dalits are denied access to public space and resources. Though the narrator was discriminated against by the upper caste teachers and students, she was resilient in facing them. She says that she could do so because of the influence of Ambedkar on her. According to her, Ambedkar was the light of Dalits' life. He asked the Mahars to educate their children, and inspired them to fight against the atrocities. He asked them not to

give offerings to the gods who never cared about them. And he also asked them not to eat the meat of the dead animals.[26]

The Dalit autobiographer in general identifies himself/herself with in the community. Besides, the aspects of self-assertion, self-respect and building Dalit consciousness are the central concerns of a Dalit autobiography. Political consciousness among the Dalits is another major concern of the texts. Though the authors of the Dalit autobiographies suffer from unique problems, the philosophy of Ambedkar is considered the appropriate remedy for the liberation of the Dalits. In other words, the life and philosophy has been the basis of the formation and construction of the Dalit identity. Therefore the protagonists of the autobiographies use education as the true weapon for the emancipation of the Dalits.

Badri Narayan opines that the Dalit narratives are the narratives of identity and self- respect: "The new narratives of the Dalit politics, which appear as cultural narratives of identity and self-respect are filled with memories of dissent against dominance and oppression."[27] The Dalit narratives are written in the respective Dalit idiom. The construction of the Dalit narratives is based on a sense of self-respect. Badrinarayan writes:

> Dalits, for acquiring social respect, use their personal narratives through which they glorify their community. The identity created through their narratives of the past by the Dalits renders instable the canons determined by Brahmanism for granting status in society, such as purity-pollution beliefs, birth-based ascription, specific caste characterization and caste hierarchy, and status ascription.[28]

'Dalit consciousness' refers to the Dalit politics and identity in terms of political awareness and the notion of collective identity among the diverse Dalit communities. These two uses are fundamentally the same in their emphasis on the need to be aware of the exploitation based on caste. Narendra Jadav's *Out Caste* is about the journey of a Dalit family form a small village, Ozar to a big city Mumbai, and then to far off places like the USA. It presents the story of a Dalit family in search of Dalit dignity. It depicts the oppressive and exploitative village life as well as the successes of the three generations of this family. The central narrative follows the transformation of this family. It was the great transformation of Jadav's family into a very successful family of eminent scholars and officers.

In the foregoing discussion, an attempt has been made to delineate the various identity movements in historical outline. The

non-Brahmin movements in India, beginning from the Bakthi period to the contemporary period, contributed to the process of constructing alternative history against the caste Hindus. It has been argued in the chapter that the construction of the Dalit identity is not a contemporary feature. The attempts of the identity movements of the early period have been obliterated. The Dalit autobiographies selected for the study have been interpreted as the attempts of relocating, reforming and reconstructing the Dalit identity as a challenge to the Brahminical oppressive social order.

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